

Interview with Susan Day

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

SUSAN DAY

Interviewed By: Joan Bartlett

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Q: Susan, could we start with a little bit of your background: where you were born, grew up, met your husband, etc.?

DAY: I was born in Burlington, Vermont and grew up mostly in upper New York state, and then went back to Vermont to go to the University of Vermont. I met my husband in high school and then right after college we were married and went almost directly into the Foreign Service. We were both, I think, twenty-three when we went into the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you know that he had that in mind when you got married? Was it a joint decision? Were you interested in foreign affairs?

DAY: I think it was just one of those things that developed when he left school. It seemed interesting; and it was a job. We started off by moving to Washington for three months for language training and then we went to Naples in November of 1955.

Q: Did you both have language training?

DAY: Yes.

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Q: Did you have children then?

DAY: Yes. I had a baby just before we went to Washington; she was nine months old when we went to Naples.

Q: Did you have full day Italian training?

DAY: No. I think it was two hours a day in Washington and then when we got to Italy I continued language training—one hour a day, five days a week for a year or two years. We did pretty well. Italian isn't that difficult a language.

Q: That baby must have been much admired in Naples. Was she very blond like you and John?

DAY: Yes, she was. I think the most difficult thing in Naples was trying to find a place to live. I can still remember some of the weird places we were shown. Somebody had called in about an apartment in an old building in the Vomero high in the hills, and the Consul General wanted me to check it out. So I went up there with the driver. We went into this huge stone villa and up to about the third floor, and we were walking around when all of a sudden the corridor just sort of stopped and there was rubble on the floor. The ceiling was about four feet high, and we crawled through. We eventually regained the corridor and we ended up asking directions from some old lady in an apartment that was being visited by nuns. Anyway, it was a strange experience. Needless to say, we didn't end up living there.

Q: So they didn't have any apartments for the Consulate?

DAY: They had apartments in the Consulate building. There was one good size one that was occupied and then there were a couple of smaller ones with one bedroom. We finally found an apartment and moved in on the first of January—all our furniture had gotten delayed somehow. It was so cold. All of the rooms had fourteen foot ceilings, and you

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could see the light under the doors—about an inch of daylight. It was cold! The next year they put in central heat, but meanwhile we had only two kerosene heaters.

Q: Did you have someone to help you in the house and with the baby?

DAY: Yes. But we went through about nine maids until we found somebody satisfactory. It wasn't the fact that you had so much housework, it was that you had to have somebody there when you went out.

Q: Was it a pretty active social life?

DAY: Yes. It was only ten years after World War II and the visa section was enormous—there was a large refugee relief program—so there were a lot of Americans there. We were also very friendly with the Italians—there were particularly nice people who worked at the Consulate.

Q: How many years were you there?

DAY: Two and a half. Then we had a direct transfer to The Hague. We went there in 1958. We were there two years with a home leave in between—which was horrible.

Q: Tell me about home leave.

DAY: We had to go home and there we were with a three-year-old and a baby and no place to go. We weren't able to afford to go anyplace on our own. We ended up at my parents and they didn't enjoy it any more than we did. It was just hard for a two month stretch. A few days would have been all right. We visited around as much as possible.

Q: And then back to The Hague? Was that a nice post?

DAY: It was a nice post, very nice. It rained a lot, but it was close to things, places to visit. We went to Paris, Luxembourg, Brussels, London, back to Italy to visit. So we liked it.

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Then one day we got a telegram transferring us to Lyon. This was about two weeks after we had gotten settled in our house, and I guess we just kind of turned it down. It would have been a nice post to go to, we would have liked to, but we had just gotten moved. So, Sydney went to a Dutch kindergarten and that was very nice. She picked up Dutch in six weeks—it took me considerably longer.

Q: Did you take lessons?

DAY: Yes, and actually I took French lessons there, too, feeling that Dutch was so limited. Then we went back to Washington for two years.

Q: Did you have a house in Washington?

DAY: No. We didn't have anything at that point. We rented in Washington, but it was at this time that we bought this house in New Hampshire. We had tried to buy a house in Washington, but it didn't work out, so we ended up buying this place, which was a much better buy. It was in John's family and we bought it from his aunt. At that time these houses were going for very little—that was in 1963. So from then on for home leaves we had a place to go to. But everybody came to visit us—I'm not sure which was worse! All the family would come to see us, so it wasn't very restful. I felt like I was running an inn—washing sheets, cooking big meals.

Q: Did you do a lot of entertaining in Holland? What was John's position?

DAY: He was in the political section. At that time the U.S. had a World Court case—I've forgotten the details—but I do remember one day we entertained the entire World Court at a cocktail party—which was a highlight of my life. John was doing the liaison with The Court. Wellington Koo was a member of the Court at that time—a Chinese diplomat of the old school. But actually it was a very easy group of about fifteen or twenty, and some of the local people as well.

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Q: Did you do your own cooking?

DAY: Not for parties. I did for every day. Big cocktail parties we had catered.

Q: Did you swim in the North Sea?

DAY: Occasionally. It was cold. We'd go to the beach, but the wind would blow so, we couldn't sit around.

While in The Hague we were presented to Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhardt. The entire diplomatic corps drove from The Hague to the palace in Amsterdam on New Year's Day. The reception was held at noon, and after we had bowed, curtsied and wished their Majesties Happy New Year, we were served a cup of bouillon and returned home. This presentation followed several meetings of the wives at which we were instructed how to curtsy and how to dress. One had to wear a formal short dress with long sleeves. Black was not allowed and hats were mandatory. I still have my gorgeous red velvet hat I wore on that occasion.

Q: Did you get to know people from other embassies in The Hague?

DAY: Yes. We belonged to a junior diplomats group that met about once a month and we did quite a few interesting trips—visiting the dykes, going down coal mines, things like that. It was a good group.

Q: So after that, it was back to Washington?

DAY: Yes. We brought back a Dutch girl who worked for us and I went to work to pay her salary. She eventually moved on—she went back to Holland and then came back to the States—to California.

Q: Your children then were how old?

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DAY: One in second grade, one in kindergarten and then Christina was born.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

DAY: I was a secretary. I worked at American University. I got paid the grand sum of about \$5000 a year.

Q: Where did you live?

DAY: In Washington northwest.

Q: Did you have much to do with the State Department when you were there?

DAY: Some. Mostly keeping up with friends—but not too much officially. We got more of that when we went to Greece.

Q: Was Greece your next post?

DAY: Yes. We went there in '63 and stayed until '68.

Q: Did you also learn Greek?

DAY: Oh, yes.

Q: You have a lot of languages.

DAY: It's amazing how quickly you forget. But I'm sure it would come back. Yes, I took Greek once we got there and I went every day for two hours for two years. The best help was having a maid who couldn't speak English so you are forced to speak it. And being there five years is a good length of time to learn. John had had language training for nine months, full time, six or seven hours a day, before we went to Greece. It was grueling, but he was very proficient. It was a very enjoyable post.

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Q: What did you like most?

DAY: Just sort of the Mediterranean atmosphere—it was like Naples in some ways.

Q: Did you travel a lot?

DAY: John took a lot of trips and I was able to go with him. We'd take a jeep from the Embassy. We did Crete that way, we went all through the Peloponnese, and we went through northern Greece up to Janina. It, of course, was a difficult time politically. We were there when they overthrew the King and they had the coup of the Generals and it was a sad period. After the coup we had a lot of people knocking on our door, after dark sometimes. They wanted help from John. They couldn't phone because their phones were tapped and they couldn't go to the Embassy.

Q: Were these people he already knew?

DAY: Yes. Some of them were put under house arrest. They were looking for help one way or another—sometimes to get out. And then a lot of people we had known were arrested and put in jail.

Q: Did the atmosphere seem violent? Were you afraid?

DAY: Well, I remember the day the coup started. I woke up at about two in the morning, and I heard the tanks going down the road. I got up and looked out and saw it was tanks and went back to bed and went to sleep [laughter]. I guess I thought it was a dream—it didn't click with me, although that was a military route from downtown Athens. So in the morning the phone rang at about seven. It was a friend of Sydney's, who was then in the fifth grade, and she gave us the news that there had been a coup. John left to try to go to the Embassy—I don't think our phone worked, it was then cut off—and that was scary because down by the plaza just before the Embassy, it was all tanks and troops. He'd gotten in as far as the DCM's house and then drove in the rest of the way with him. Once

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he got in there he wasn't sure of when he was going to come home. As I remember, he was there a couple of nights.

Q: Was he able to call you? Were you worried?

DAY: It was worrisome. I don't remember if we were really out of touch. Things did settle down but it wasn't the same.

Q: I suppose it was very interesting for John.

DAY: Oh, yes, but sad, too. And particularly so when the Americans were accused of bringing this about or supporting it.

Q: Did you get that feeling from your friends—did you feel people were looking at you differently?

DAY: No, I don't think so. It was the newspapers really.

Q: And your children were all in school by then?

DAY: Two of them were. Christina was pre-school. Actually she went to a Greek nursery school. This little old Renault would come and pick up all the kids and it was like a circus car—all the little kids stuffed in this car. It was a good school.

Q: She liked it? She didn't object to not being understood?

DAY: She spoke Greek. She was just a baby when we went—I think six months old—and we had maids who spoke nothing but Greek so she spoke both Greek and English.

Q: And the older two? Was it an international school?

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DAY: They went to the Ursuline school. There were two choices for English speaking schools and that was one. The other was the American school. It was really a wonderful school. They had a very international group. The teachers and the nuns were American.

Q: Did you spend most of your time with Americans there—with the Embassy crowd? You didn't live all together did you?

DAY: Oh, no. We never had Embassy housing—ever.

Q: You made a point of that?

DAY: We would have been glad to have it—but it just never happened. There was a real mix of people. There was a group we used to play bridge with, two to three tables. A mixture of Greek and some Australians, Lebanese. It was very busy socially. Three nights a week. But we got to know a lot of Greeks very well. They are very friendly people and sociable.

Q: And was the weather always perfect?

DAY: Almost always. It wouldn't rain all summer from April to October, then there were some rainy spells. But in the long summer there isn't even any dew. You can sleep out—nothing's ever damp. When the sun goes down it's just lovely and cool, never humid. We did a lot of swimming and picnicking.

Q: And then, after Greece, were you back in Washington?

DAY: Yes, for a long tour: eight years we stayed in Washington. We bought a house, got moved in, and then we were offered a small consular post in Italy—and it was one of those things...we would have loved to go ordinarily but I couldn't face moving again right on top of getting back and having been away so long. So we stayed there and eventually moved to Ottawa.

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Q: During those eight years in Washington, did you work again?

DAY: Yes. I ended up just working at home though for the same person I had worked for before, publishing a technical newsletter. I was doing the business end of that. It worked out well. The kids were in the sixth and eighth grade and first grade and I didn't really want to be away from home.

Q: Were you living right in Washington?

DAY: No, we were in Potomac. We bought a house, finally.

Q: That is the house with the famous fence?

DAY: Yes.

Q: During lunch before this interview, I had admired that wonderful garden here at the house in Ossipee (this is to the tape, Susan). It's unbelievable the amount of flowers. Susan, say again what happened in Potomac.

DAY: Well, we had a small fence out back. The kitchen window looked out on it. I thought it would be nice to have a border of flowers in front of it that I could see from the kitchen. It was like pulling teeth to get John to dig that up—once he did it though, he never stopped!

Q: So he built gardens all around that house in Potomac?

DAY: Yes, and we took white pines from this place down there because there was no privacy in that house. We took the trees down in the back of a little VW and planted them in 95 degree heat. They're about 60 to 75 feet high now.

Q: Did your move go easily coming back from Greece? Your children adjusted all right?

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DAY: Actually, we came here to New Hampshire first because we had home leave coming. I came before John did, in June and then he came in August. He had to go to Washington but then he came back here for more home leave. So the kids went to school here in New Hampshire from September to December and they loved it. No problems. And then we went down to Washington and we were in that section of Potomac, Maryland. And, I don't know, my oldest daughter had a terrible time adjusting. She was just miserable. It was an area where nobody had any roots—nobody knew anybody else—it was that kind of a situation and, of course, it was that time just before the whole drug business was starting. The whole atmosphere was: “let it all hang out.” She had a hard time adjusting. It's strange that the hardest move can be back to the States.

Q: She was in the eighth grade?

DAY: Yes. We stayed on for eight years, though, so both the older kids had graduated by the time we left. Christina was still in school when we went to Ottawa. But that was hard, too, the move to Ottawa. Sydney was working but Mark was just out of high school. He went a semester to the State College but he really wasn't ready for it. He wasn't old enough to do well. He ended up coming with us to Ottawa and he went part-time to the University of Ottawa. That worked out well. He was there for three years and then he went back to Washington and eventually put himself through the University of Maryland on his own.

Q: And Christina went to high school in Ottawa?

DAY: Yes. She was in eighth grade. She went to Lisgar Collegiate. And that wasn't too difficult a move. The kids there were very nice—it was a good atmosphere at school—in the whole town for that matter. She liked to skate and to ski—she broke a leg and an arm in the process.

Q: And how did you like Ottawa?

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DAY: Oh, I liked it—a delightful city—very easy living, an easy adjustment. There was some anti-Americanism I always felt, but individually people were very nice.

Q: Did you get to use the French you learned in Holland?

DAY: Not much. I could read and write it pretty well but I didn't seem to have the opportunity to speak it—and if I had the opportunity, I felt too uncomfortable with it.

Q: Did you travel a lot in Canada?

DAY: No, not as much as I would have liked to. We did go to Toronto, Montreal, Nova Scotia and Quebec City, but I never got to the west coast.

Q: Did you find that, since you were so close to New Hampshire, you would come down here for vacations?

DAY: Yes, we came to New Hampshire and sometimes to Washington.

Q: Your daughter still has friends up there?

DAY: Yes. She just went to her best friend's wedding in Toronto. She thought of going back there—actually both my son and daughter liked it so much they did think of going back but it's not that easy to get a work permit—we kind of discouraged it and they didn't go. But my son has very good friends: he met a family with seven brothers—he still goes back to see them and they go to Washington sometimes.

Q: Was the Embassy nice—a close community?

DAY: No, I don't think it was and I think the morale there was very low and that was difficult.

Q: It was from there that John decided to retire?

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DAY: Yes, he always says its the best thing he ever did. We are both enjoying it very much. I don't envy young Foreign Service Officers going out with the political situation the way it is in the world: terrorist groups and that kind of thing.

Q: Do you think the morale in the State Department generally was becoming a little lower as the years went by?

DAY: Yes, I do. We all started out with great enthusiasm I think—although I must say I never enjoyed the discipline or whatever you want to call it that some people felt they had to impose on you.

Q: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that. This is one of the things this oral history project is looking at. Did that Foreign Service directive in the early seventies that said that wives would no longer be on their husband's efficiency reports...did you feel before that you had to always do the right thing?

DAY: Oh, yes.

Q: And then afterward that you could kick up your heels?

DAY: No, I don't think things changed at all—on paper maybe.

Q: Did you have some difficult people in your posts?

DAY: Oh, yes. I got called on the carpet once in Greece. It was when King Constantine's father died and we were in mourning for three months or so. There was a party given the day after the mourning was lifted and I wore a black dress because I was a little bit pregnant and it was the only dress I could fit into. And the next day the wife of the DCM directed the wife of the Political Counselor to call me in, read me the rules of etiquette and made mention about that dress, and anything else she could think of for me. I mean, that sort of thing. And Fourth of July parties that were so organized that you had to stand

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in that corner from eleven to eleven-thirty and somebody else in this corner. It was so orchestrated that it was just ridiculous to everybody, I'm sure. And you couldn't have a Christmas party without a rehearsal. We were going to do some bell ringing and we had to rehearse for that just for an Embassy Christmas party.

Q: This was in Greece?

DAY: No, it was in Holland. Yes, I felt there was a lot of pressure all the time. It may have been me partly, other people maybe handled it better, but I did feel uptight about it most of the time.

Q: And it didn't make any difference after the directive?

DAY: I don't think it made that much difference. You still were expected to do things.

Q: And did you find when you left the Foreign Service it was a huge relief—and you can now say anything you want to say?

DAY: I think it is lovely! I don't miss it at all. We made a lot of good friends, and we had a lot of good experiences, but I don't think I'd want to do it again.

Q: Did you ever have trouble with the logistics of moving? Did you handle that in your family?

DAY: I think we both did it together. I don't think I was left...the only time I had to do it was from Washington to Ottawa, because John had to go up earlier and I had to handle one end of the move. But that wasn't as difficult as some moves might be. You could drive up and you had your car to throw all those last minute things into.

Q: So it wasn't really the moving per se that wearied you in the Foreign Service as much as just the general atmosphere—parties every night, etc.?

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DAY: Yes. All the moves went all right. Sometimes the furniture would take forever to arrive and we'd be six to eight weeks in a hotel while we were looking for a house, or waiting for one to be available.

Q: Not easy with kids. Is there anything else you'd like to say? One thing I was wondering about. You said you had just three months in Washington right at the beginning of your Foreign Service career when you learned Italian. Would it have been helpful to have been given some training about—not about whether you had to stand in a corner at the Fourth of July party—but about what you might have to expect in different countries?

DAY: Yes. I think so. I'm trying to remember. I think we were given a book on social usage in the Foreign Service to read and study—about calling cards, and making calls on people, and how to address people, and don't ever sit on the sofa—you know, that kind of thing.

Q: Good Lord—I didn't know that. I've sat on a lot of sofas.

DAY: It's the seat of honor, I guess.

Q: In every country?

DAY: I think so. Anyway we were given that sort of thing to make you worry before you got there. But I guess it was probably helpful to know the kind of thing you were going to run into.

Q: But maybe area training for the rest of the family?

DAY: It would have been helpful. I remember getting off the boat in Naples and just being overwhelmed, and getting to the hotel, adjusting to the food and all that sort of thing. John had been to Europe before, but I never had. And especially Naples with its narrow streets and the port area was kind of wild.

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Q: I know what you mean. I see we're at the end of our tape. Many thanks for sharing your stories and thoughts.

DAY: I think this oral history is interesting to do but I'm sure that a lot of people have been through more exciting times.

Q: In a way the day-to-day things that we all went through are actually the most exciting, and you went through a coup—how exciting do you want to get?

DAY: Right. But I was thinking of those Embassy people in Pakistan who were holed up in the top floor of the Embassy for two days or so when the Pakistani army rescued them from the rioting on the floors below—that was a lot to go through.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Spouse: John G. Day

Spouse Entered Service: 1955 Left Service: 1982 You Entered Service: Same

Status: Spouse of Retiree

Posts: 7/55-11/55 Washington, DC 11/55-4/58 Naples, Italy 1958-60 The Hague, Netherlands 1960-63 Washington, DC 1963-68 Athens, Greece 1968-76 Washington, DC 1976-80 Ottawa, Canada 1980-82 Washington, DC

Spouse's Position: Political Officer

Place/Date of birth: February 1, 1932, Burlington, Vermont

Maiden Name: Susan Atwood

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Parents (Name, Profession):

Ralph Atwood, Personnel

Grace Atwood, Librarian

Schools (Prep, University): University of Vermont Date/Place of Marriage: June 16, 1953,
Delmar, NY

Profession: Real estate broker

Children:

Sydney

Mark

Christina

Volunteer and Paid Positions held: A. At Post: B. In Washington, DC: Administrative
Assistant

End of interview